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TRANSACTIONS

OF THE

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, &c.

No. I.

*On the Language of Signs among certain North American Indians.
By William Dunbar, Esq. of the Mississippi Territory, com-
municated by Thomas Jefferson, President of the Society.*

NATCHEZ, June 30, 1800.

SIR,

Read 16th January, 1801.

MR. NOLAN'S man of signs has been here, but was so occupied that a long time elapsed ere I could have an opportunity of conversing with him, and afterwards falling sick was seized with such an invincible desire of returning to his own country, that I had little hopes of gaining much upon his impatience.

A commencement however we have made, and although little has been done, it is sufficient to convince me, that this language by signs has been artfully and systematically framed. In my last I took notice of some analogy which I conceived to subsist between the Chinese written language and our Western language by signs; I had not then read Sir George Staunton's account of the British Embassy to China. I will here beg your permission to transcribe a paragraph or two from that work, which appear to strengthen my ideas of the probability of their common origin. "Almost all the countries border-

“ing on the Chinese sea or Eastern Asia, understand and use
 “the written Chinese, though not the oral language. About
 “200 characters mark the principal objects of nature; these
 “may be considered as roots of language, in which every other
 “word or species in a systematic sense is referred to its proper
 “genus or root. The heart is a genus represented by a curve
 “line, somewhat of the form of the object, and the species
 “referable to it, include all the sentiments, passions, and af-
 “fections, that agitate the human breast, each species being
 “accompanied by some mark denoting the genus or heart.”
 Now Sir if the commencement of this extract was altered and
 we were to say “Almost all the Indian nations living between
 the Mississippi, and the Western American ocean, understand
 and use the same language by signs, although their respective
 oral tongues are frequently unknown to each other,” the re-
 mainder of the paragraph would be perfectly descriptive of the
 organization of this language by signs, and would convey to an
 adept a full and complete idea of the systematic order which
 has been observed in its formation. Permit me to refer you
 to the short and very imperfect list of signs enclosed, where
 you will find water to be a genus, and rain, snow, ice, hail,
 hoar-frost, dew, &c. are species represented by signs more or
 less complex, retaining always the root or genus as the basis
 of the compound sign.

We are also informed that “if any uncertainty remains as
 “to the meaning of a particular expression, recourse is had to
 “the ultimate criterion of tracing with the finger in the air or
 “otherwise, the form of the character and thus ascertaining at
 “once which was meant to be expressed:” here also is a strong
 analogy between the language and practice of those countries
 so far separated from each other, for those Western Indians are
 so habituated to their signs that they never make use of their
 oral language, without instinctively at the same time tracing
 in the air all the corresponding signs, which they perform with
 the rapidity of ordinary conversation. I cannot avoid con-
 cluding that the custom of the Chinese of sometimes tracing
 the characters in the air, is a proof that this language by signs
 was at early periods of time universally used by them and by
 all the nations of the east coast of Asia; and perhaps if enquiry

be made it may be found that the usage of this universal language is not yet totally neglected. In the above-mentioned account of the embassy, we are told only, I think, of three Chinese characters, the sun represented by a circle, the moon by a crescent, and man by two lines forming an angle representing the lower extremities; those three signs are precisely the same which are used by the Western people: in order to represent the two first mentioned, the thumb and fore-finger of the right hand are formed either into a Circle or Crescent, and the sign of man is expressed by extending the fore-finger of the right hand and bringing it down, until it rests a moment between the lower extremities.

It is probable that Chinese Sailors or others, may be found in your maritime towns, who might give some useful information, and it cannot I suppose be difficult to procure a collection of Chinese characters with English explanations, which would afford an opportunity of making farther comparisons upon a future investigation of this curious subject. I think Captain Cook says, some where, that in some of the Islands of the Western pacific he found persons who possessed a great facility of communicating their ideas by signs and made much use of gesticulations: this was probably no other than the language by signs; and if it is found that the Chinese actually use at this day upon some occasions a language by signs, actual experiment alone will convince me that it is not the same which is used by our Western Indians. Hence would spring forth an analogy and connection between the Continents of the New and Old World which would go directly to the decision of your question, without being involved in the ambiguity arising from the imperfect resemblance of words.

WILLIAM DUNBAR.

THOMAS JEFFERSON, *President A. P. S.*

Signs made use of by the Indian Nations to the West of the Mississippi, referred to in the foregoing letter.

White. with the under side of the fingers of the right hand, rub gently upon that part of the left hand which corresponds with the knitting of the bones of the fore-finger and thumb.

Egg. The right hand held up with the fingers and thumb extended and approaching each other as if holding an Egg within.

Stone. The right hand shut give several small blows on the left.

The same or similar to what went before. Place the two fore-fingers parallel to each other and push them forward a little.

Water. The hand formed into a bowl and brought up to the mouth passing a little upwards without touching the mouth.

Rain. Begin with the sign of water, then raise the hands even with the forehead, extending the fingers outwards and give a shaking motion as if to represent the dripping of water.

Snow. Begin with the sign of rain, then the sign of air or cold and conclude with the sign of white.

Ice. Begin with the sign of water then of cold, then the earth and lastly a stone with the sign of sameness or similarity.

Hail. Begin with the sign of water, then the sign of cold, next the sign of a stone, then the same, then the sign of white and lastly conclude with the sign of an Egg; all which combined gives the idea of hail.

Frost. Begin with the sign of water, then the sign of night or darkness, then the sign of cold, then the sign of white, and lastly the earth.

Cloud. Begin with the sign of water, then raise the two hands as high as the forehead and placing them with an inclination of 15° let them gently cross one another.

Fire. The two hands brought near the breast touching or approaching each other and half shut, then moved outwards moderately quick, the fingers being extended and the hands a little separated at the same time, as if to imitate the appearance of flame.

Bring, fetch or give me. The hand half shut with the thumbs

pressing against the fore-finger, being first moderately extended either to the right or left, is brought with a moderate jerk to the opposite side, as if something was pulled along by the hand. Consequently the sign of water preceding this sign would convey the expression "give me water."

Earth. The two hands open and extended, brought horizontally near each other opposite to either knee, then carried to the opposite side and raised in a curve movement until brought round and opposite to the face.

Air. The right hand held perpendicularly upwards and brought forwards with a tremulous or vibratory motion until it passes beyond the face.

Big, great or large. The two hands open placed wide apart on each side the body and moved forwards.

Fear, to be afraid, to cause fear. The two hands with the fingers turned inwards opposite to the lower ribs, then brought upwards with a tremulous movement as if to represent the common idea of the heart rising up to the throat, the three last signs placed in the order given, would convey the idea of a violent hurricane.

Sun. The thumb and finger forming a circle elevated in front towards the face.

Moon. The thumb and finger open are elevated towards the right ear; this last sign is generally preceded by sign of the night or darkness which

Night is the two hands open and extended crossing one another horizontally.

Heat. The two hands raised as high as the head and bending forwards horizontally with the points of the fingers curving a little downwards.

Cold. The same sign as for air, but when applied to a person the right hand is shut and held up nearly opposite the shoulder and put into a tremulous motion.

I. The fingers of the right hand laid against the breast. This last sign with that preceding placed after it would signify I am cold.

Smoak. Begin with the sign of fire then raise the hand upward with the fingers open as if to represent smoak.

Clear. The hands are uplifted and spread both ways from the head.

Bow The left hand being a little extended, the right hand touches it and makes the motion of drawing the cord of the bow.

Thunder. The sign of rain accompanied by the voice imitating the rumbling sound of thunder.

Lightning. First the sign of thunder, then open or separate the hands and lastly bring the right hand down towards the earth in the center of the opening just made.

Cow. The two fore-fingers brought up to the side of the head and extended outwards so as to represent the position of the horns.

Male and Female. Note, to distinguish between the Male and Female in all cases add for the male a fillip with the fore-finger of the right hand on the cheek and for the female, bring the two hands open towards the breast, the fingers approaching and then move them outwards.

Gelt. Bring the fingers and thumb of the left hand together as if something was held by them, then approach the right hand and make the motion of cutting across what is supposed to be held in the left hand, and then draw off the right hand as if pulling away what has been cut.

Dunghill fowl. Bring the thumb and fingers of the right hand together, and holding the hand moderately elevated, move it across imitating the motion of the head of a cock in walking.

Turkey. The open hands brought up opposite to the shoulders and imitating slowly the motion of the wings of a bird, to which add the last sign.

Duck. The last sign, then the sign of water, and lastly the sign of swimming which last is performed by the fore-finger of the right hand extended outwards and moved to and fro.

Horse. The right hand with the edge downwards, the fingers joined, the thumb recumbent, extended forwards.

Deer. The right hand extended upwards by the right ear, with a quick puff from the mouth.

Man with the fore-finger of the right hand extended and the hand shut describe a line beginning at the pit of the

stomach and passing down the middle of the body as far as the hand conveniently reaches holding the hand a moment between the lower extremities.

Woman. The finger and thumb of the right hand partly open, and placed as if laying hold of the breast.

Child. Bring the fingers and thumb of the right hand and place them against the lips, then draw them away and bring the right hand against the fore arm of the left as if holding an infant. Should the child be male, prefix the sign of a man before the last sign, and if a female, do so by the sign of the woman.

Boy. Bring the fingers and thumb of the right hand to touch the lips, then extend the hands and make the sign of man, then raise the hand with the fingers upwards and placed at the height of a boy.

Girl. Begin with the above sign and make the sign of woman, and then raise the hand to the height of the girl.

You. The hand open held upwards obliquely and pointing forward.

He, or another. The fore-fingers extended and hands shut, and fingers brought over one another, or nearly touching and then separated moderately quick.

Many or much. The flat of the right hand patting on the back of the left hand ; which is repeated in proportion to the greater or lesser quantity.

Know. The fore-finger of the right hand held up nearly opposite to the nose, and brought with a half turn to the right and carried a little outwards. Place any of the articles before the last sign ; which will then signify, I know, you know, he knows ;—both hands being made use of in the manner described, implies to know much.

Now, or at present. The two hands forming each an hollow and brought near other and put into a tremulous motion upwards and downwards.

Come here. The hand stretched outwards with the palm under, and brought back with a curve motion downwards and inclining to the body.

Go. The back of the hand stretched out and upwards.

What say you. The palm of the hand upwards and carried circularly outwards and depressed.

No, nothing, I have none. The hand held up before the face, with the palma outwards, and vibrated to and fro.

From whence come you, say. First the sign of you, then the hand extended open and drawn to the breast and lastly, the sign of, what say you?

Come. The fore-finger moved from right to left with an interrupted motion as if imitating the alternate movement of stepping.

Mine. The hand shut and held up to the view.

House. The hand half open and the fore-finger extended and separated, then raising the hand upwards and give it a half turn, as if screwing something.

Done or Finished. The hands placed edge up and down parallel to each other, the right hand without, which latter is drawn back as if cutting something.

Spring Season. The sign of cold, to which add the last sign of being done or finished.

Body. The hands with the fingers pointed to the lower part of the body and then drawn upwards.

Hair. The movement of combing.